Nature in Chaucer

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Master Thesis

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Nature in Chaucer.

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Difference between the Anglo Saxon nature description and the Chaucerian.
The Anglo Saxon wrote of the sea.
Chaucer spoke of the land.

The Canterbury Tales separately considered.
Table of nature words in the several Tales.
Conclusions from a comparison of the various Tales.

The Tales considered as a whole.
An enumeration of the nature words in all the Tales.
Deductions from this enumeration.
Apparent paucity of nature words, no proof of scarcity of nature in the Tales.
The fact that Chaucer used such words as tree oftener than words like flower does not prove that he preferred the former to the latter.
His figurative use of words shows that he appreciated the latter as much, or more than the former.

V. General observations regarding nature in Chaucer.

A. His love of nature in all its phases.

B. Although he sets forth no definite nature theory, yet he may be considered the progenitor of Wordsworth.

C. His nature touches are fresh and suggestive.

D. His land-scape descriptions are most excellent.

E. Chaucer's rank as a nature poet.

VI. B. My reading and study in the preparation of this paper were confined to the Globe Edition of Chaucer's Poems, to which all references are made.

Stature in Cashmeres

J. D. Cleaver.

Nature in Chaucer.

The Anglo Saxons were pre-eminently a warlike and a sea-faring people. So much, indeed, did they enjoy war that they conceived of mortal conflict as merely a "play of swords". Their predilection to war, as well as their adventurous spirit, often brought them into contact with the sea, which they dearly loved. In Anglo Saxon literature there are many references to sea and sky, and not a few most beautiful descriptions of the bearing waters, but the references to land-scape scenes are very few. Indeed, the most charming land-scape description in all Anglo Saxon literature is the following passage from Beowulf:

"They" (Grendel and his mother) "occupy inaccessible land, the retreat of wolves, windy nesses, dangerous fen-paths, where the mountain stream leaps down under the mist of the cliffs, the flood under the ground. Not far hence in the measure of miles lies the mere, over which

rustling boughs hang, trees fast by their roots overhang the water; There, each night, one may see a startling sight, a fire on the flood. Of the children of men, no one now lives who is so wise that he knows the bottom of the mere. Although the stag pursued by dogs, the hart strong of horn and driven from afar, will seek the forest; yet he will give up his life on the shore rather than go into the mere to hide his head. It is an uncanny place whence the wan, surging waters rise up to the welkin, when the wind stirs up loathsome weather to the extent that the skies become obscure and the heavens weep."

When, however, we come to study Chaucer we no longer find a preponderance of water description, but we do find numerous references to external nature, and a few very beautiful land-scape scenes. Chaucer dearly loved his native land, - its flowers, dales and meads; hence his treatment of nature is largely confined to vegetable

life, re-enforced and beautified by the twittering of "bryddes" and the delightful shimmering of "the yonge sonne" which "hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne". To minutely record the results of an exhaustive study of nature in all of Chaucer's writings would require a volume, hence this paper merely attempts an exposition of nature in the Canterbury Tales, particularly that part of nature manifested in plant life.

The several Tales are quite as unlike in the amount of nature they contain as they are in subject matter. Nor is the inequality in the amount of nature more apparent than the difference in the words which give us our conceptions of nature in the various Tales. The different words pertaining to nature as exhibited in plant life in the Tales are as follows.

Prologue,		Prologue continued,	
flour	1	onions	1
mede	1	garlike	1
croppes	1	rote (metaphor)	1
berry	1	holt	1
flax	1	hethe	2
leker	1	tree	1

Prologue continued,

Daysie ---- 1.
Total number of words (literal) ... 15,
total number of different words (literal) --14,
metaphorical words--1.

Knightes Tale,

flour ---- 1
flowres --- 2
flour (metaphor) -- 3
flowres white and red ---1.
lilie --- 2
rose --- 2
trees --- 1
tree ---- 2
leves --- 3
lefe (metaphor) -- 1
woodbind --- 1
hauthorn ---- 1
grene (substantive) -- 2
bush --- 4
bushes ---- 1
wood --- 3
wodes --- 2
forest --- 3
oke ---- 4
lawer --- 4
braunches --- 1
bough --- 1

Knightes Tale continued,

boughes -- 2
box-tree --- 1
grove --- 7
greves --- 3
fyre --- 1
birch --- 1
ashe --- 1
alder --- 1
holme --- 1
popelere --- 1
wilowe --- 1
elm --- 1
plane ---- 1
ash --- 1
box ---- 1
chestein --- 1
lind --- 1
waffe ---- 1
thorn --- 1
beche --- 1
hasel --- 1
ewe --- 1
whitpultre ---1.
Total number of different words (literal) --- 43,
different words (metaphorical) -2,
total number of words (literal) --- 73,
total number of words (metaphorical) -- 4.

Millieres Tale,
licoris --- 1
setewale -- 1
leth ---- 1
appleo --- 1
perjenete tree ---1
blosme --- 1
bush --- 1
rote --- 1
herbes --- 1.
Total number of
different words (lit.) -- 9.

Cokes Tale,
tree --- 2
bery --- 1.

Wife of Lames Tale,
tree --- 1.

Wif of Bathes Tale,
tree --- 1
bush --- 1.

Sompnoures Tale,
aspen leef --- 1.

Marchantes Tale,
flour (met.) --- 1
flour --- 1
floures --- 1

Marchantes Tale continued,
mede --- 1
tree ----- 5
fruit ----- 1
peres ----- 2
herbes ---- 1
leves --- 1
lauer ---- 1
pery ---- 2.
Total number of different
words (literal) --- 10,
total number of
words (metaphorical -- 1,
total no. of words (lit.) -- 16.

Squieres Tale,
gras --- 1
oke --- 1
grene (substantive) 1.

Franklines Tale,
flowres ---- 2
flowis --- 1
flour (metaphor) -- 1
mede --- 1
grapes --- 1
herb --- 1
plante --- 1
vine --- 1
greine (substantive) 2
boestes --- 1

Franklines Tale continued,
leves - - - 1.
Total number of different words (literal) - - - 10,
total number (metaphorical) - - - 1,
total number of words (literal) - - - 12.

Doctoures Tale,
lily - - - - 1
rose - - - - - 1.

Pardoneres Tale,
grove - - - - - 1
tree - - - - - 1
oke - - - - - 1.

Prioresses Tale,
lily flour - - - 1.

Rime of Sire Thopas,
bramble flour - - - 1
lily flour - - - 1
lily flour (metaphor) - - 1
flour - - - - 1
rose - - - - 1
hepe - - - - - 1
herber - - - - 2

Rime of Sire Thopas continued,
liorin - - - - - 1
setewale - - - - - 1
nuteswage - - - 1
gras - - - - - 1
cypres - - - - 1
forest - - - - 1.
Total number of different words (literal) 12,
metaphorical words - - 1,
total number of words (literal) - - - 13.

Monkes Tale,
flour (metaphor) - - 3
lily flour - - - 1
tree - - - - 1
tree - - - - 2
oliveres - - - 1
vines - - - - 1
wode - - - - 1.

Nonnes Preestes Tale,
grove - - - - - 1
tree (metaphor) - - 1
dale - - - - 1.

Second Nonnes Tale,
flowres - - - 1
lilie - - - - 3.

Second Nonnes Tale,
liliez - - - 2
rose - - - - 1
roses - - - - 3.
Total nunmber
of different words
(literal) - - - 5,
total nunmber of
words (literal) - - 10.

Chaucines yemames
Tale,
apple - - - - 1.

Chaucipler Tale,
forest - - - - - 1
flour (metaphor) - - 1.

Persones Tale,
braunches (metaphor) 4
rote (metaphor) - - - 6
flour - - - - 1
leues (metaphor) - - 2
whete - - - - 1
tree (metaphor) - - - 6
twigges (metaphor) - - 3
fruit - - - - 1
fruit (metaphor) - - 3.

Total nunmber
of different
words literal - - 3,
total nunmber of
different words
(metaphorical) - - 6,
total nunmber of
words (literal) - - 3,
total nunmber
(metaphorical) - - 24.

11. The preceding table shows that the Knightes Tale contains forty-three different nature words used in a literal sense, a trifle more than one half of such words in all the Tales including the Prologue. Then follow the Prologue with fourteen different nature words, Nune of Sire Thopas with twelve, Marchantes and Frankleines Tales with ten each; Millieres with nine; Wyves with seven, Second Nunes Preestes with five, Squieres with four, Pardoneres and Persones with three each; Cokes, Wif of Bathes, Doctoures and Nonnes Preestes with two each; and the Prioresses, Man of Lawes, Sompnoures and Chanouns Yemannes with one each. Now, keeping in mind the subject matter of the several Tales, we may formulate a few rules, which, though not true in the absolute, are approximately correct. Beginning with the Knightes Tale, the most romantic and chivalric of all the Tales, it will be seen that the number of nature words decreases as the romance and chivalry become less.

Furthermore, we note that the more poetic a Tale is the more nature words does it contain, while the more didactic it is the less does it contain. The Knightes Tale and the Persones Tale respectively stand at these two extremes. The latter, however, is a slight exception to this rule, since it has three nature words used in a literal sense instead of one or two, as some of the Tales have. Again, the indelicate Tales, the Wife of Bathes and the Millers being excepted, contain very few or no nature words.

In all the Tales including the Prologue, Chaucer uses in a literal sense the word tree sixteen times; grove, nine; flowres and lilie, seven each; flour, bush and oke, six each; rose, leves, grene (substantive) and launce, five each; wood, herbes and lily flour, four each; hethe, mede, trees, greves, roses and forest, three each; flowres white and red, lilies, boughes, woodes, bery, fruit, peres, pery, gras, licoris, and seteuale, two each; while each of the following words occurs but once: rote, holt, croppes,

garlike, onions, leke, flax, braunches, bough, box-tree, wood-bind, hauthorn, bushes, perjenete tree, blosme, aspen leef, herb, grapes, plante, vine, vines, forestes, brambleflour, daysie, hepe, nuteinuge, cypres, olimeres, dale, apple, apples, whete, fir, birch, ase, alder, holm, popler, wilow, elm, plane, ash, box, chestein, bind, maple, thorn, beche, hasel, ew and whpultre.

It will be observed that, out of the eighty-three different nature words in the Tales, but thirty-one are used more than once, while only seven are used more than five times. Let it not be supposed, however, that these eighty-three different nature words accurately measure the amount of nature to be found in the Tales, for such is not the case. If, instead of counting each word but once, we count it every time it occurs, we shall increase the number of words from eighty-three to one hundred-eighty-three. Furthermore, if we would form a correct idea of the amount of nature in the Tales, we must not only count each word every

time it occurs, but we must also remember that the effect and quantity of nature descriptions are greatly augmented by the attending circumstances and by other words than nouns, which alone have been given in this paper.

The word tree occurs sixteen times, while flowers are found only seven times. The ratio of sixteen to seven quite closely expresses the ratio of such words as tree, grove, forest, oke and branches to words like flowers, lily, rose and daisy. Barring the enumeration of some twenty different kinds of trees used for the funeral pyre of Arcite, the ratio of the former class of words to the latter becomes much less. Although this exception is evidently justifiable, inasmuch as in the enumeration no attempt is made at nature portrayal, yet it does not equalize the two classes of words; hence we may reasonably conclude that nature as exhibited in the first class of words is either more pleasing or more familiar to Chaucer than nature as

manifested by the second class.
The alternative which assumes that Chaucer loved trees more than flowers is untenable, since he speaks even more passionately of flowers than of trees. By an apostrophe to May, which he always associated with flowers, he says:

"O Maye, with all thy flowres
and thy grene,
Right welcome be thou faire,
fresh May,
I hope that I some grene
here getten may"

Again he says of the garden in which Emily was wont to roam:

"The odour of flowres, and the
freshe sight,
Would han ymaked any herte light."

Another evidence that Chaucer appreciated flowers as much, or more than trees is found in his many figurative uses of flowers. With the exception of the Persones Tale, which may be excluded on account of its didacticism, by far the larger number of similes and metaphors, pertaining either to flowers or trees, have to do with the former.

The solution of the question lies, not in the difference of Chaucer's love for trees and flowers, but in the difference of his knowledge regarding these two manifestations of nature. Indeed, we should be surprised had he not said more, at least in quantity, of trees than of flowers, for they have ever been better understood.

Not only did Chaucer appreciate the tree and the flower as individual manifestations of nature, but he even more enjoyed the effect produced by the harmonious combination of all its phases. He dearly loved to take a stroll over the mede "alle ful of freshe flowres white and rede", to lie down upon the "yonge grene" and listen to the "melodie" of the "brydes" as they did their "obeisaunce to faire, freshe May", and to enjoy the mellow rays of the "yonge sonne" which "Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne".

One of the best examples of his appreciation of all the phases of nature is the following passage from the Prologue:

"Whan that Aprill with

his shoures sote
The droughte of Marche hath perced
to the rote,
And bathed every veine in swiche
licour,
Of whiche vertue engendered is the
flour;
Whan Zephirus eke with his
sote breethe
Enspired hath in every holt and
hethe
The tendre croppes, and the yonge
sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe
cours yronne,
And smale foules maken melodie,
That slepen alle night with open eye,
So pricketh hem nature in hir
corages;
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
The holy, blisful martyr for to seke,
There is nothing studied or assuming
about this description. It is a
natural outburst of a soul over-
flowing with the love of nature.
It is so simple, ardent and sponta-
neous that it transports us
back to the period of development
in the history of the human
race, which corresponds to Words-
worths early childhood, of which

he says:

"There was a time when meadow,
grove and stream
The earth, and every common sight
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream".

Unlike Wordsworth, Chaucer does not give us a well formulated theory of Nature and her various attributes. He does not, however, leave us wholly in the dark on this point, for several different passages in the Tales, very clearly show that he is not only the "Father of English poetry", but likewise the progenitor of Wordsworth's nature theory. In proof of this statement, two passages may be quoted, the first from the Knightes and the second from the Doctoures Tale:

"For nature hath not taken his beginning
Of no partie ne cantel of a thing,
But of a thing that parfit is and stable"...

"This maid of age thelf yere
was and tway
In which that nature hadde
swiche delit.

"For right as she can peint a
lily whit
And red a rose, right with swiche
peinture
She peinted hath this noble creature"...
Even a casual reading of these
passages can not fail to show
that they embody the germ of
Wordsworth's nature theory. The
first ascribes to nature the
characteristics of universality,
perfectability and stability, while
the second personifies Nature and
invests her with the distinct-
ively human quality of sensations
of pleasure or, as Chaucer puts
it, of "delit".

Although it is interesting
and beneficial to study the attributes
which Chaucer ascribes to nature
yet it is even more important
to know something of his love
for and treatment of external
nature, much of which is em-
bodied in his simple, though
masterly, touches. Such phrases
as "the yonge grene", "the lilie
upon his stalk grene" and "the
mede all ful of flowres, partie
white and red", are very simple,
beautiful and suggestive.

To me they seem very like the spontaneous effusions of the city child who, for the first time, carefully picks his way through the daisies and pansies of a meadow, fearing that even the sound of his footsteps may disturb the delicate flowers. Indeed, Chaucer was just such a child roaming at pleasure in just such a mede, for before him no English poet had ever sauntered up the dale, admiring "the white lilie flour" and reverencing the "dayesie".

Although Chaucer does not often describe landscape scenes, yet when he does he invests them with a distinctness, interest and charm which were never attained to by his predecessors or immediate successors. All of his landscape descriptions are masterpieces, considering the age in which they were written; while a couple of them would not dishonor Wordsworth, Shelley or Tennyson. The best nature description in all the Tales, and it certainly is graphic and very pretty, is the following passage from the Knightes Tale:

"The bisy larke, the messenger

of day,
Saleweth in hire song the
morwe gray;
And fyry Phebus riseth up so
bright,
That all the orient laugeth
of the sight,
And with his stremes dryeth
in the greves
The silver dropes, hanging
on the leves."...

That Chaucers treatment of nature is perfect no one will declare, that it is equal to Tennyson's no one will maintain, but that it is rivalled by no other English poet before Spenser and surpassed by few before the romantic school of poetry came into existence, will be denied by no student of English literature. His treatment of nature, as well as his poetry in general, forms a transition from Middle English to Modern. The Anglo Saxon and earlier Middle English writers say very little of external nature; while even Langland, Chaucer's own contemporary, does not depart from the customs of

his predecessors. Chaucer alone, as a nature poet, stands out as the sole shimmering star, the one beacon light in the literary heavens of the first sixteen centuries of the history of English literature.

Nature in Lahan

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